

The Science of Science Blogging – the complicated task of defining a science blog.

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What is the definition of a science blog? Is it merely a tool that disseminates, explains, comments upon, investigates, aggregates or otherwise deals with science? An increasing number of science blogs also comment upon the process and communication of science itself. [Paige Brown Jarreau](#) shares her plans for navigating research in this area as she explores the diversity of science blogging styles, approaches, formats and authors.



They say that one of the most difficult decisions in grad school is the one that determines what you'll end up studying for years of your life as a PhD student, and potentially even a post-doc and junior faculty member. *What will my dissertation be about?* Students often anguish for months, if not years, over this decision. But for me, it came absolutely naturally. After several (frustrating) research projects related to the psychology of media effects, I decided that talking to science communicators about their practices was interesting and rewarding enough to warrant more of my scholarly attention. And when I decided to study the practices of *science bloggers* in particular – well, I could almost sigh in relief. Why hadn't I thought of this before? This is a world I KNOW.

I am not exaggerating when I say my decision to pitch [a blog](#) to Nature Network in 2011, during a stint of an unfinished PhD curriculum in biomedical engineering, changed the course of my life. I slowly realized that I enjoyed communicating science just as much, if not more, than being at the lab bench doing it. That blog has since had incredible impacts on my transition from material scientist, to science communicator, to science communication scholar.

So deciding to do my PhD dissertation in mass communication on the *science of science blogging* only seemed most appropriate to the impact I've seen science blogging have in my own life, as well as in the lives of others. It wasn't good enough, in my opinion, to offer others only personal anecdotes about the impacts of science blogging on our lives and on science in the public sphere. I wanted to uncover, for the benefit of others, [what science blogging really means – what it looks like, who does it, how they do it, and what impacts it has on the wider science media ecosystem](#).

Long story short, on October 24, I launched [a project on Experiment.com](#) to raise funds for a major component of my PhD research: [a large-scale survey for science bloggers](#). The goal of the project is to understand how science bloggers choose what to write about. Why did I decide to crowd-fund this project? That's a separate discussion, and one that I've written about [here](#).

More Americans today get their science news online than ever before, and much of that is now coming from science blogs. And yet, relatively little research has targeted the practices, routines and values of science bloggers. Traditionally, science bloggers have been the champions of fighting bad science on the internet. But today, they are so much more. Who are science bloggers? What do they do? How do they decide what to blog about? I decided to find out.

An important aspect of my project that I haven't explored on my Experiment.com page, and which I want to explore here, is that my chosen dissertation topic begs the question: *What IS a science blog?* Before conducting any social science research of this nature, you must define your target population. Who IS a science blogger? What counts as science blogging? How do I define a science blog?

“[B]logs are now diverse and ubiquitous, and have hit the mainstream.” – Mary Garden, *Defining blog: A fool's errand or a necessary undertaking*, Journalism 2012

But defining even a blog, much less a science blog, turns out to be a very complicated task. The uses and genres of “web blogs” have become so diverse that, as [Herring and colleagues predicted in 2005 \[PDF\]](#), they have become broadly a “socio-technical format, whose convenience and general utility support a variety of uses.”

From a technological structure perspective, a blog is simply an online tool for publishing one's thoughts, stories, news, links, visual materials, etc. on an ongoing basis. In 2008, [Wilkins defined a blog](#) as a “fundamentally a continuously updated web page, with entries (‘posts’) that have date, time and, if many authors contribute to the blog, author-name stamps.” A blog may be hosted on a personal webpage, through a blogging platform service such as [WordPress](#), on a social media network such as [Tumblr](#), on an organizations' website, on a community blogging network such as [Scientific American blogs](#) or [SciLogs.com](#), or on any number of other blogging platforms or traditional news organization websites. Typically, albeit [with important exceptions](#), each blog post may be commented upon by readers, who may be required to sign-up with the blogging platform or website to comment. Each blog post also typically features social media share buttons, by which the individual blog post URL can be shared to social networking sites including Twitter, Facebook, Google+, etc. Social networks such as LinkedIn are also beginning to offer long-form posting capabilities, blurring the lines between blogs and social networks and necessitating a closer look at microblogging platforms as playing a more critical role in blogging practices.

A science blog may be defined as a blog featuring, at least primarily, content that disseminates, explains, comments upon, investigates, aggregates or otherwise deals with science, scientific research, science communication, science policy, science in society and/or other science-related concepts or events ([Wilkins, 2008](#)). An increasing number of science blogs also comment upon the process and communication of science itself, as opposed to focusing directly on the explanation of science and scientific research. In 2011, Vinciane Colson wrote that “[most blogs explore the scientific process rather than just the published findings: for example, relationships between ‘science and society’, the researcher’s life, science communication, and problems of academic life.](#)” Modern science blog posts generally feature long-form written as well as multimedia content, although today many science blogs are strongly [focused around artwork](#) such as [BuzzHootRoar](#), videos and other non-text media.

In 2007, the science blog [was described by two researchers in France](#) as a “tool which enables scientists to speak directly to the people, allows people to read what scientists have to say, provides an opportunity for experts from different fields to exchange knowledge and enables wide-ranging dialogue between real people and the ‘ivory tower’” ([Colson, 2011](#)). But the definition of a science blog in 2014 is far more encompassing than the “scientist” blog predominant in 2007. Today, the concept of the science blog has expanded, especially as traditional science journalism has increasingly become the purview of writers in the science blogosphere.

I have realized that for my dissertation, I want to explore *a variety of uses* for science blogs, especially how a broad range of science bloggers decide what to include and what not to include in their online postings to a wide variety of blogging platforms. I apply the concept of science blogging liberally, to encompass a wide range of content and blog authors including current scientists, former scientists, students of science, students of journalism, educators, current and former reporters, strategic science communicators, scientific societies and various scientific organizations, etc. In other words, not all blogs are the same – there are lots of different styles. Through my research, I hope to explore this diversity of science blogging styles, approaches, formats and authors.

One way I do this methodologically is allowing *science bloggers to define themselves*, for example by inviting a broad range of science bloggers to take [my forthcoming research survey](#). I am more interested in whether YOU consider yourself to be a science blogger, and how you navigate this definition in terms of choosing what to write about, than I am in applying some external definition of science blogging to limit my survey participants, for example.

Do you consider yourself to be a science blogger? If so, then you can participate in my project by signing up to receive my survey when it is ready. Just click [here](#). Would you like to give me feedback on my survey of science bloggers? Please visit my [Experiment.com](#) page and respond to my call for [input on survey questions](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Paige Brown Jarreau is a PhD candidate in mass media and public affairs at the Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University. She studies the intersection of science communication, journalism and new media. She uses a variety of approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, to study science news norms, [beliefs and values of science communicators](#), and most recently the [practices and routines of science bloggers](#). She is the author of [From the Lab Bench](#), a science blog hosted on [SciLogs.com](#), where she is a community manager. She tweets at [@FromTheLabBench](#).

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